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AUTHOR Wyatt, Monica; Pickle, J. Michael
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effect of the stated objectives of remedial reading programs on the objectives and teaching practices of classroom reading instructors. Interviews were conducted with nine reading teachers in two highly structured college reading programs. Each operated with a set curriculum, set materials, and prewritten tests, but the stated purposes of the two programs differed widely: one existed to prepare students to become independent college learners; the other existed solely to prepare students to pass a reading test required for graduation. Results revealed that the teachers embraced their own personal philosophies and taught according to them no matter what the circumstances or purposes. Teachers with traditional beliefs tended to teach with lectures and direct guidance, certain that there is a correct answer to questions and desiring that their students reach that answer. Teachers with iconoclastic beliefs used social settings and indirect guidance to provide opportunities their students might choose to pursue, and believed that what is correct for individual students in one circumstance may be incorrect in another. A set of three continua were developed with each pole of each continuum corresponding to traditional or iconoclastic views which appeared to encompass the views of the participants. A comparison of these continua as a whole reinforced the view that teachers will teach according to their own beliefs no matter how tightly controlled the program. (KEH)

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The Philosophies, Goals, and Practices of College Reading Instructors: How are they Implemented in the Classroom?

Monica Wyatt
J. Michael Pickle
The University of Georgia

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The Influence of Personal Teaching
Philosophies on Practice in the Teaching of Reading

> Sue[1]: Most teachers develop their curriculum around their basal or their textbook. I didn't have that. So I had to develop what I wanted them to learn and then find that stuff to do that kind of thing. . . . In other words, the objectives drove my materials, as opposed to my materials driving my objectives. I had no materials.[2]

Sue is describing an incident in her career which she considered to be unusual. She believes, with "most teachers," that she normally follows the stated objectives of her curriculum and its materials. However, placed in a circumstance where she had no access to such luxuries she fell back on her own personal objectives in teaching her students. She scrounged for whatever materials she could find that fit her objectives and, in this isolated case, adhered to her own beliefs rather than those of publishers or principals. A return to a better funded program would cause her return to the stated objectives of her curriculum.

When we began conducting interviews for research into teachers' philosophies, we agreed with Sue's statement. We were convinced that, normally, the circumstances of the classroom and the stated objectives of a program such as a basal reading series or a specific purpose set by authorities, would drive the objectives of classroom reading instructors. Our preconceived notion led us to an investigation of instructors in two highly structured college reading programs. Each operated with a set curriculum, set materials and prewritten tests, but the stated purposes of the two programs were widely different: one existed to prepare students to become independent college learners; the other existed solely to prepare students to pass a reading test required for graduation. With such different purposes, we believed that the objectives and practices of the teachers

in each would differ widely, especially since the instructors were not completely autonomous within the programs. We interviewed nine college reading instructors to find support for our belief.

We were wrong.

Mary: I think good teaching is good teaching. . . . For instance, when I taught special ed I used many of the methods I learned in my reading classes to teach my special ed students and they, lo and behold, they worked better than some of the special ed methods I had used. So, you know, I can't say that I really applied anything different and some things that I found worked very well with kindergarten students can also work if you modify it with college students.

Soon after our conversation with Mary, Hank spoke clearly about his practices with first grade students.

Hank: You have to put yourself down on a level with kids. You have to make sure that you're a person and you treat them as a person and you don't try to stand up and be six foot tall with them three feet tall even though they are three feet tall. You get down with them.

Later, Hank described his practices with college students.

Hank: And I didn't try to put myself above them or anything. I rather put myself beside them. . . . I sat down with them.

As our conversations continued, teacher after teacher described practices in teaching elementary school similar to practices they used with college students, regardless of the program in which they taught. Not all of them were as social as Hank; several were more didactic, but they adhered to their practices as well.

How could teachers use such similar practices in such widely disparate circumstances? The needs of special ed students, kindergartners, and first graders differ radically from those of college students. Surely teaching

objectives and practices, under normal circumstances, will differ also. Instead, as our interviews progressed, we found that the personal objectives of each teacher appeared to influence their practices in the classroom more strongly than did the stated objectives of their curricula. Apparently, the mechanism driving their objectives was something other than the stated purpose of a particular curriculum, despite what we and Sue believed.

Method

We discovered our error while conducting semi-structured interviews with our participants. We began each interview with the same question: "What was your first teaching job?" By prompting our participants to describe their teaching history we intended to help them relax during our conversations with them. Hence, although the goal of our research was to investigate instructors' objectives with college students, we inadvertently found ourselves becoming interested in each participant's entire range of teaching practices.

The two college programs we investigated were a well-established developmental studies program and a remedial program offered by the Reading Department of a major southeastern university. We interviewed four participants from each program: Debbie, Joan, Sue, and Mary from Developmental Studies; and Bob, Hank, Steve, and Glenda from the Remedial Reading course. One additional participant, Linda, who taught both developmental studies and remedial reading in a southwestern university was interviewed via the telephone in order to give us additional perspective. By coincidence all participants had taught elementary or middle school as well as college level reading.

The developmental studies program emphasizes teaching study strategies to incoming freshmen, who are tracked into the program by virtue of their SAT scores and high school grade point averages. It's final purpose is to produce independent learners able to decide how they will study varying content subjects, and to equip

them with specific strategies for so doing. The remedial reading course aids older students who have failed the reading examination required by the university for graduation. The remedial program emphasizes strategies for taking that examination, and is unconcerned with improving learning strategies beyond that narrow purpose.

Following the interviews, conversational analyses were conducted using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). To do so, we isolated from transcripts of our audiotapes what each of us, independently, considered to be significant statements supporting our emerging theory. We often agreed with each other in our choices. We then compared the significant statements of each participant with statements of others, and attempted to describe the personal teaching philosophies of each as they emerged from the data.

In analyzing our data, we sought to discover an underlying reason for our participants' consistency even when teaching in such disparate settings as elementary school and college. Through our analysis, we discovered that our original question--what different teaching philosophies may result from teaching for widely different purposes--was insufficient.

Results

We believe that we found instead that teachers embrace their own personal philosophies and teach according to them no matter what the circumstances or purposes. The objectives they choose to pursue tend to fall in line with their personal philosophies, no matter what the setting or purpose of their teaching. Teachers with traditional beliefs tends to teach with lectures and direct guidance, sure that there is a correct answer to questions and desiring that their students

reach that answer. Teachers with iconoclastic beliefs, such as Hank, use social settings and indirect guidance to provide opportunities their students may choose to pursue, and believe that what is correct for individual students in one circumstance may be incorrect in another. Most of our participants embraced philosophies that fell between those two extremes, but several were positioned close to the two poles of that continuum.

We developed a set of three continua, with each pole corresponding to traditional or iconoclastic views, which we felt encompassed the philosophies of our participants.

These continua were not intended to divide our participants into two separate camps; most participants' philosophies fell between the poles of the continua. These three continua were then compared as a whole.

We tried to avoid placing any value judgments on any extreme position by choosing labels that might appeal to the people who embraced each philosophy. Every participant we interviewed is an expert, successful teacher; their instructional choices work for them. Additionally, our personal teaching philosophies, although not opposite, fall on different sides of our continua. One of us holds a rather traditional philosophy, and the other's approach is more iconoclastic.

Perhaps the sharpest contrast of philosophies that we found was the "Relativist/Absolute Idealist." Relativists tend to be suspicious of absolutes; they believe that many circumstances may influence knowledge. To them, truth is

fluid and uncertain; what may be true in one circumstance may not be true in others. Linda, rather extreme on that continua, spoke clearly to that position.

> Linda: [Speaking about what succeeds with her students] Yeah, the application and the critical evaluating what works, but not saying 'This is how to study.' And even the names of the texts, you know we made the change from How to Study in College, which kind of bristles me when [I think of it]. The title of the critical thinking book that we use, too, is like that. And I think it's so funny, Asking the Right Questions, [as though] there are right questions and you must ask them. But [we're] changing from that and the title is Becoming an Educated Person, or something like that. . . . The change in philosophy between the two texts I think is real critical.

Debbie represented the Relativist's discomfort with strong guidance and standards for correct teaching.

> Debbie: We're in a department where . . . basically the curriculum is set up. Which in one hand is very good . . . and on the other hand it's more difficult because I'm used to being on my own for ten years in the classroom making all the decisions myself.
>
> I may have been my best teacher that first year because I didn't know any better. I didn't know what was expected so I just did whatever I wanted to. And now as you get more in the profession you tend to do more things sometimes what you 'should' be doing, and what people expect you to do, where you don't have anything to lose at the beginning. So in a way I think maybe my first year was my best year teaching.

Joan, on the other end of the Relativist/Absolute Idealist continuum, often expressed frustration with people who speculated about questions she believed to be clear-cut, and stated her desire to know what she should do to teach correctly .

Joan: I would probably go berserk if I ended up being hounded nightly with these esoteric questions. . . . I don't even like sitting beside a person that can even ask them. . . . I really like to present what I'm going to present and cover it about twice and will expand a little bit, but if you want to philosophize, let's go somewhere else. I don't feel like you should, that the rest of the class should have to listen.

Teaching has never been what they told you it was going to be.

The advantage here is that you are trained by a master teacher . . . who could actually do the job better than anybody else around and could show you exactly how it could be done.

[The form used by students to evaluate instructors] is a wonderful little guideline to follow. Yet, you know, have you ever seen one of these in a public school? You know you haven't. You haven't seen a nice little guideline.

Oddly, Joan, known to both of us as a colleague, views herself as a flexible person on the other end of the continuum. Her statements, though, reveal her displeasure with uncertainty. She continually made statements indicating that she believed her students could also be clearly categorized.

Joan: They've proven my classes for the last three quarters had higher SAT scores than the average Education major over here. You know, they've proven in numbers.

Not everybody is college material.

We labeled our second continuum as "Social Construction/Classical Didactic." In essence, more social teachers make personal contact with their

students on as equal a level as possible, while the Classical Didactic teacher assumes a position of authority and often lectures. Hank's social comments have already been noted. Others not as extreme as Hank expressed similar views.

Sue: I did a lot of sharing things of myself, more so to make them feel comfortable.

Linda: In terms of study strategies, I don't think it can be taught in a didactic manner. I think there's no success at all. They learn it as content, if it's taught in a didactic way.

Debbie diverged from the Iconoclastic position in her classroom management skills. In that area she represents the Classical Didactic view.

Debbie: I usually had a lot of discipline problems in my classroom before they got in my room, not after they got in my room.

I think I'm a real good lecturer.

Our third continuum was "Extrinsic Reinforcement/Intrinsic Reinforcement." Extrinsic reinforcers believe that they control the learning of their students, while intrinsic reinforcers believe that the students themselves are in control of their own learning. Our most extreme example of an extrinsic reinforcer was Bob, who saw himself as a role model for his students, and viewed the content of the courses he taught as secondary to his own experience.

Mike: Why did you think that you'd like teaching?

Bob: Dealing with kids. Being a role model. I thought at that time that the only role model that a lot of kids saw at school was female, an old lady with baggy stuff hanging out of her [polyester dress.] And I wanted the role of a young, energetic young male also there.

[Speaking about college students] I think if the teacher is just very energetic and motivated then that just shows through and it begins to rub off on students.

I have an insight that I can share with them. But we also cover content knowledge that's in the book, you know, we don't forget about that. . . . But I think most textbooks that are set up for these survey level reading courses will cover the content, so I'm not concerned that we're not getting all the content.

Joan, again, was quite sure of best strategy for her students.

Joan: If it's too complicated the student I understand is not going to use it. I push the concept cards more than anything else because that's the simplest.

Debbie leaned more toward the center of this continuum; she took her students' views into account, while still guiding them to the strategies she felt were best.

Debbie: The annotating, I liked that . . . but we do it in a more formalized way than I think a student would probably use it. And I think that's understood that we do it the perfect way, the ideal way, and then when you get out there in the real world you adapt it. . . . The concept cards worked for some of my students, but I think the mapping worked better.

Linda took the most extreme view, believing that the students themselves control their own learning.

Linda: I always asked my students to evaluate the learning strategies and the materials. . . . And then I would adapt according to what kinds of things they found to be most effective. . . . And have them apply criteria, choose criteria and then evaluate which of those strategies are helping them most with their tests.

I think they're very comfortable when you start out in a course telling them, 'I can't tell you the best way to learn. But what I can

tell you are a number of things that have worked well for other students and what research says. And then you're going to have to decide for yourself, looking at yourself as a person, the course, all of those different things, and evaluate what's going to work.'

Discussion

We began by seeking support for our belief that extrinsic factors--the purpose, setting, and needs of distinctive students--drove the objectives of instructors. We ended by finding support for the opposite view: that the intrinsic personal philosophies of instructors are the dominating factors driving their objectives. We chose to investigate two groups of instructors within comparable but disparate programs. The theory that emerged from our data took us beyond the investigation of instructors' objectives within college reading programs; instead, we found that circumstances differing even more widely produced the same phenomenon. If teachers adhere to their own intrinsic philosophies across such diverse settings as elementary school and college, it would seem that our study has a message about the practice of prescribing curricula. Apparently teachers will teach according to their own beliefs no matter how tightly controlled the program.

Our study raises two new questions. First, how are teachers' philosophies formed? Nothing in our data sheds light on the dynamics that may have led our participants to their positions. Second, do teachers perceive themselves to be adhering to their own philosophies, or do they themselves believe that they adapt to circumstances? Of our nine participants, only Sue appears to adapt. Joan appears to us through personal acquaintance to be unaware of her own philosophical orientation, but no evidence exists within her interview to support our view. Are other teachers as unaware? Only new investigation might answer these intriguing questions.

Notes

[1] All names have been changed within this document to protect the identities of our participants.

[2] Quotations have been edited to remove some repeated words and speech hesitation markers, such as "uh," and "ah." In no instance has the meaning of any quotation been altered.

References

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.